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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 002225

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SUBJECT: Somalia: Atmospherics During Somalia Program in Kenya

REF: Nairobi 2164

Classified by Special Envoy John Yates, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Summary: The Somalia Unit, including the embedded Military Information Support Team (MIST), conducted a Youth Enrichment Program (YEP) from August 25-29, 2008 in Mandera, on the Kenya-Somalia border (reftel). While the program was an unqualified success in changing negative attitudes toward the US into positive ones, the youth, facilitators, and Somalia Unit members encountered a variety of unusual experiences during the week. This message describes some of the week's dynamics, including positive changes in the youths' attitudes, safety concerns of the participants, and site security during the program. End summary.

Initial Demeanor of the Youth

¶2. (C) The Somalia Unit's August 25-29 Youth Enrichment Program (YEP) from August 25-29, 2008 in Mandera, on the Kenya-Somalia border, proved to be a tremendous success (reftel). Even so, events before and during the YEP evinced the precarious nature of engagement with Somalia, and the threats faced by those Somalis who choose to renounce violence and conduct positive engagement with outside actors. As described in reftel, the program included 45 Somali youth who came to Kenya, and 18 Kenyan youth. The participants came from schools, youth organizations, and a group of reformed militia. The youth participated in a series of sports and cultural activities during the week.

¶3. (C) The YEP participants, particularly the Somali youth, were very suspicious of their American hosts at the beginning of the week. This attitude was partly attributable to the participants not having been fully informed about the program by our Somali facilitator, whose assistance was required due to our not being able to travel into Somalia but whose ability to get all information to all participants appears to have been limited. On arrival, the youth appeared wary of us, and several stated that they had never met an American before. They were unsure of our motives and remained skeptical for the first part of the week, quizzing our Kenyan drivers and locally-enlisted assistants to ask about the reason for our conducting the program. The youth were also suspicious of one another. We were told that the participants feared that there were informers among them reporting back to hostile parties inside Somalia about who participated, what was said during discussions, and how the American hosts treated the youth. Conversely, the Somali and Kenyan elders present for the youths' arrival and the opening ceremony quickly thanked the Embassy team for putting on the program. The elders stated that the participants' minds were "occupied by violence" and any exposure to a productive and safe program like the

YEP would be welcome.

14. (C) Several of the teenagers and young adults told us that before and during the week they were receiving phone calls and text messages from inside Somalia asking about the event, and even implying negative consequences for participating in the YEP. Some of the Kenyan and Somali facilitators stated that the youth would hesitate to wear the jerseys, emblazoned with "Somali Youth for Peace" and Somalia and U.S. flags, once they got back to Somalia. One participant, a leader among the group, addressed the rest of the participants at the conclusion of a discussion session, ensuring that the American officers were present. He stated to his colleagues that he was hearing accusations that he received payment from the Americans for facilitating and participating, and that he wanted to ensure that whomever was communicating with hostile parties in Somalia communicated the fact that he had not received any payment for his work on the YEP. The Embassy team also heard assertions during the week that Somali elders, presumably hostile elements, in the youth's home area were upset at not having been consulted on and offered payment for the youths' participation in the program.

15. (C) In terms of perspectives on the United States, the youth repeated the oft-heard assertions that the U.S. Government had complete control over the Ethiopian forces inside Somalia, and that the United States had the option to withdraw the Ethiopians. They also criticized the United States for not embracing Muslims in the United States. While criticizing U.S. foreign policy, the youth appealed for U.S. assistance in Somalia, even early in the week, stating that other nations were powerless to help Somalia. Some speakers at the opening ceremony went so far as to thank the Embassy for engaging, noting that multiple NGO's have engaged without result and sometimes to the detriment of the area, owing to their lack of

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political power and sometimes questionable operating practices.

Changing Attitudes Among the Youth

16. (C) As the week progressed, the participants became more open to us and to each other. The discussions became more cordial, and the youth were more eager to interact with the American hosts and with one another. The questions became more frank and direct. By the end of the week, the participants were expressing strong and candid opinions about the situation in Somalia, both during discussions and via their poetry, artwork, and letters to leaders. The youth, most of whom were between 15 and 17 years of age, expressed disappointment at never having experienced peace and rule of law, owing to the 18 years of sustained conflict in their home country. One young man said the "youth have lost their country" and described how violence is often the only means of income generation.

17. (C) Although the genders did not mix while the elders were present early in the week, males and females began to play sports together, eat together, and mingle more freely as the week progressed, with the females objecting to being moved back to the local girls' school on the final night of the YEP.

18. (C) At the end of the week, the youth seemed to be very grateful for the Embassy's work in conducting the YEP. While several of them demanded money for their participation and were visibly hostile when we refused to give them cash, we identified a solid core of youth leaders with whom we will remain engaged and likely execute some Public Diplomacy programming in the near future. Several of the youth described extremely impressive programs with which they are involved, including work programs for reformed militia, sports leagues, and youth employment schemes. Many of the youth directly stated that their opinions of the United States had been changed by the YEP. For example, one youth stated that he changed his view on American tolerance for Islam when the Embassy team explained to the group that Muslims exist peacefully in the United States with believers of all faiths.

Security

¶9. (C) Security was an ongoing concern during the week. At the recommendation of local police officials and in consultation with the Embassy RSO, we had police escorts in our vehicles from the town of El Wak to Mandera and back. We encountered police roadblocks at regular intervals, manned by police in various states of alertness.

¶10. (C) The YEP suffered some petty crime, including theft of sports equipment and art supplies. We also endured constant demands from local Kenyans, in addition to those invited to participate in the program, to join the YEP and receive food and YEP materials. In addition, the local Kenyan authorities expressed fear of hostile Somalis crossing the border to disrupt the YEP. Local administrative and law enforcement officials willingly provided police protection for the duration of the YEP. In addition, the Kenyan officials stated that they were especially vigilant before and during the week because of the presence of both American and Somali guests. We experienced no significant security problems during the YEP.

¶11. (C) Demonstrating the suspicion the Kenyans hold for their Somali neighbors, the local Kenyan officials required a relatively substantial payment for lodging in the dorms at both the boys' and girls' schools in Mandera, which they stated was to compensate for the damage that they assumed their Somali guests would inflict on the school facilities.

Comment

¶12. (C) Comment: The dynamics described above display the challenge of our engagement with Somalia, but also the tremendous potential for positive results. The YEP was an unqualified success, and we hope to conduct similar programs in the near future. End comment.

RANNEBERGER